

The Flyleaf

Friends of Fondren Library

Vol. 52, No. 2

Spring 2002



**Fondren Library Bids
Nancy Boothe Farewell
Upon her Retirement**

A Letter to the Friends

Dear Friends,

In this issue of *The Flyleaf* you will read more about our successful Homecoming brunch which I mentioned in my first letter. Our honoree, Ed Snow, could not have been more deserving (and entertaining). He accepted the award with characteristic grace and levity. Again, Teddy Adams deserves kudos for organizing the well-attended event.

Teddy and fellow board members responsible for the success of the earlier Distinguished Guest Lecture and book sale earned a well-deserved rest during the holiday hiatus. But the board hit the ground running in January by approving a donation to the Library exceeding \$45,000 to fund an Electronic Resources Center which will provide valuable resources to the faculty and students to facilitate electronic publications. The source of the funds was a match of contributions to the Friends by faculty, staff and university retirees from the beginning of the Rice – The Next Century Campaign to date. An article about the Electronic Resources Center will appear in the next issue of *The Flyleaf*.

In the next issue you will read about our annual Rice Authors Reception held on Sunday, February 10. Honored authors and non-authors alike enjoyed a panel discussion by the authors of four very diverse publications and an opportunity to mingle with the authors and peruse and purchase their works. This event, my favorite in that it focuses on the real mission of the University, scholarship, never ceases to surprise and delight. The breadth and depth of intellectual pursuit manifested by the works of our honorees year after year is truly astounding. I am exceedingly proud of the Friends for initiating and carrying on this event. It is a great tribute to the scholarly contributions made by our University community.

Every month, like clockwork, the gala committee has met and continued to work diligently in preparation for the Friends of Fondren Gala XXII. This is our Super Bowl. I remind you again that we are honoring former Federal Reserve Board Governor Edward "Mike" Kelley, Jr. and his wife, Janet Kelley, on Friday, April 26, 2002 at 7:00 p.m. at the River Oaks Country Club. As in past years, the evening will feature a cocktail hour, silent auction, seated dinner and live auction. Tables have sold quickly.

Preparations are underway for our annual meeting to be held on the evening of Tuesday, May 21, 2002 at Cohen House. I am pleased to announce that our speaker for this event will be David Vaisey, Bodley's Librarian Emeritus at Oxford University. He will give a talk entitled "Four Centuries of Collecting: The Bodleian Library 1602-2002." Please plan to come.

Fondren Library

Founded under the charter of the university dated May 18, 1891, the library was established in 1913. Its present building was dedicated November 4, 1949, and rededicated in 1969 after a substantial addition, both made possible by gifts of Ella F. Fondren, her children, and the Fondren Foundation and Trust as a tribute to Walter William Fondren. The library celebrated its half-millionth volume in 1965 and its one-millionth volume on April 22, 1979.

The Friends

The Friends of Fondren Library was founded in 1950 as an association of library supporters interested in increasing and making better known the resources of Fondren Library at Rice University. The Friends, through members' contributions and sponsorship of a program of memorials and honor gifts, secure gifts and bequests, and provide funds for the purchase of rare books, manuscripts, and other materials that are needed to support teaching and research at the university.

The Flyleaf

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The Flyleaf

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2001 FOFL/REA Annual Homecoming Brunch

BY TEDDY ADAMS

On November 10, 2001, the Friends of Fondren Library and the Rice Engineering Alumni co-hosted their annual Homecoming Brunch. Each year at the brunch the Friends presents an award to the individual or couple that have made a special contribution to the organization. The Rice Engineering Society also presents awards for the outstanding engineering alumnus and outstanding young engineering alumnus.

At this year's event, the award from the Friends was presented to Edward Snow, a professor in the Rice English department. As Charles Maynard, the president of the Friends of Fondren explained in his introduction, Professor Snow's knowledge and love of books is not surprising. A Rice alumnus, Professor Snow received his B.A. in 1964. Then, Professor Snow explored both coasts, receiving his M.A. from the University of California, Riverside in 1966 and his Ph.D. from the University of New York at Buffalo in 1969.

Professor Snow's academic work has been nothing short of outstanding. In 1985 he won the prestigious Harold Morton Landon Translation Award from the Academy of American Poets for his translation of Rainer Maria Rilke's "New Po-

ems." This award is given annually for outstanding achievement in the translation of poetry into English. He was awarded his second Landon Translation Award for his work on Rilke's "Duino Ele-

gies." Professor Snow also won the Texas Institute of Letters Souraette Dieh Fraraser Translation award for that work. Additionally, Professor Snow has won an Academy of Arts and Letters Award and the PEN Award for Poetry in Translation. In addition to his work on

Rilke, Professor Snow has published works on Vermeer and Bruegel.

As one critic wrote, Professor Snow "has an eye and a mind for details," and Professor Snow graciously has lent that mind and eye to the Friends of Fondren. This year, as in years past, Professor Snow devoted countless hours to the Friends' book sale. His contribution was especially significant this year in that he donated more than thirty boxes of books to the sale. These books were some of the real treasures of the sale; most of them were first edition or better books.

More than merely donating books to the sale, Professor Snow also gave his energy and expertise to the drive. He spent many hours sorting and pricing books for the sale. Fur-



Donald Greive, Dr. Sydney Burrus, John H. Scott, Phillip Glynn, and Dr. Edward Snow



Charles Maynard presents award to Ed Snow

ther, throughout the months leading up to the sale, Professor Snow also turned his eye and mind for detail to the volunteers working on the book sale, helping them organize the materials for the sale.

Critics have described Professor Snow as “the best translator that Rilke has ever had.” While there is little debate on that well-deserved accolade, it is equally beyond dispute that Professor Snow also truly is one of the best friends Fondren has ever had.

The Rice Engineering Alumni honored both Sidney Burrus, Ph.D. and Phillip Glynn as Outstanding Engineering Alumni and Donald Greive as the Outstanding Young Engineering Alumnus.



DeForest Ralph and Winnie Hamilton



Ed Snow and his wife Winnie enjoy conversation with Sid Burrus



David Minter, Eric Johnson, and John Boles



Teddy Adams and Page Gandy



Kay Dobelman and Demaris Hudspeth

In Memoriam: Mary Alice Hamilton '32

BY DEMARIS HUDSPETH

When the history of Rice's library is written, the name of Mary Alice Hamilton should be on the list of "Best Friends of Fondren." She virtually kept the support group, Friends of Fondren, going in the years before a full-time director was added to the staff of the university.

To go back to the earliest days of Rice, Alice Dean quit her job as a school principal and entered Rice (in the first class) in order to get a college degree. Even as a student she became "acting librarian," serving in that capacity until she retired in 1947 (and by then she had been given the title "Librarian"). William Dix of the English department was librarian until the mid '50s when he left to head up the library at Princeton, and Hardin Craig, Jr. of the history department succeeded him at Fondren.

The Friends organization had been started by a group of alumni in 1950 and about that time Mary Alice became its de facto secretary-treasurer. She kept the records of donations, deposited them, and sent the acknowledgements. There were four meetings each year and she sent the notices for them. She helped with *The Flyleaf* although faculty members wrote feature articles in them. We have the late Dr. Alan McKillop to thank for writing or securing

most of these fine articles. Mary Alice did her work for twenty years, sometimes calling on other members to help with addressing envelopes. She insisted that the addressing be done in handwriting, and that the acknowledgements be personal

and warm when people sent donations in honor or remembrance of someone. She set the high standard of efficiency and social niceties that the organization has maintained.

Mary Alice's husband, Charles Hamilton (Class of 1928), was her partner in this work. He was a banker and helped set up two accounts for the Friends. Into one went funds collected as dues (\$5 per year, maybe \$10) and spent on mimeographing and mailing *The Flyleaf*, and sending out the acknowledgements. Into the other account went the donations and 100%

of that money went into books, at the library's discounted cost. Fondren Library footed the bill for cataloguing and preparing the books for use. Members took turns providing the refreshments for meetings.

In those early days, the librarian made the arrangements for the four meetings (there were no board members to do any of these things) and secured the speakers, these being either faculty



Mary Alice and Charles Hamilton

members or visitors to the campus. When one of the latter spoke, a dinner was given beforehand, usually at the Craig's home. Since it was not known in advance who might be available or when the meetings could be scheduled, there was no set time for the meetings. The program for the winter meeting was often based on the works of Charles Dickens, and for one of these the refreshments were plum puddings, made from the recipe of George V and cooked in English pudding bowls. I still use mine often (but not for pudding) and each time that I do it brings me memories of our sitting around the table preparing mounds of dried fruits, years ago.

Quite unexpectedly, in 1971 we had the double shock of losing both Hardin and Charles within a few months of each other. Not long afterwards, Richard O'Keefe became the new librarian (the first who had a graduate degree in library science) and, of course, Richard had his hands full with the former librarian's not being there to help in the transition. I was president of the Friends at the time and I called on my in-house counsel to help me formalize the organization. He wrote some by-laws setting out the usual stipulations as to officers, terms, etc. By that time, the organization was going well, and it was not hard to get Ralph Anderson, Lillian Illig and other faithful members to take office and for the organization to assume responsibility for all of its activities. As we know, it has flourished under the guidance of succeeding officers. But the Hamiltons and Hardin Craig were the ones who kept the flame burning brightly in the early years.

When our fine director of the Friends of Fondren goes home after a full day of work, she can, with me, feel a wave of admiration for Mary Alice and the years of fruitful and diligent work she put in on behalf of our organization.

CONTINUED FROM "A LETTER" PG. 2

Library 1602-2002." Please plan to come.

Later, there is one more treat in store for Friends looking for real adventure. The third Friends of Fondren Library Tour will head back to England in mid-June to tour an extraordinary batch of libraries, both institutional and private, in the Midlands and the West Country. There's hope that the tour will include a visit to Highgrove, Prince Charles' estate. For those of you who have made one of these journeys already, you know how singular they are. For those of you who have not, space is still available (as I write) and I cannot overstate how extraordinary the journey will be.

As is customary this time of year, our Nominating Committee is hard at work, considering additions to our board. Approaching the final months of our fiscal year, we look forward with enthusiasm to the challenges the next year will bring, but with a bit of sadness knowing that some of our fellows will depart our board. To all my fellow board members, I offer enormous thanks for your hard work and dedication to Rice, the Fondren Library and the Friends.



Nancy Boothe: a Look Back

BY DAVID M. BYNOG

Nancy Boothe, longtime head of special collections for Fondren Library, is retiring this year after a long and special relationship with Rice University. Highly regarded in her field of archives and special collections, she has lead efforts for new archival programs, served as a mentor to new professionals in the field, and in 1996 received the Distinguished Service Award from the Society of Southwest Archivists. She has worked with archival programs for numerous local organizations including Houston Grand Opera, the San Jacinto Museum of History, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. She has published extensively in her field and remains active in the Society of American Archivists, giving a presentation this year.

Nancy graduated from Rice in 1952, receiving a B.A. with honors in French. A member of the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa society, she remains involved with this organization today. Reflecting on the growth of the university from her undergraduate days, Nancy commented "In those days if you were applying to Rice, you went to the registrar with your high school grades and spoke to him for a while. A short time later he would call you and tell you whether you were accepted or not. Things have changed greatly." She views the rise of the university's college sys-

tem as a great enhancement to undergraduate life and a unique experience for the Rice commu-



nity according to students numerous opportunities. With the addition of the Art Department and the Shepherd School of Music, Nancy believes that Rice became a much richer place. With these departments, and others to follow, Rice built upon its solid foundation and brought a higher level of sophistication and culture to the school. Nancy also received an M.A in History from Rice in 1979 and has served as a University Associate for Brown College.

Additional careers, family, and study followed Nancy's graduation in 1952, and in 1965

she obtained a Master of Library Science from Catholic University in Washington. She returned

later that same year to Rice University as a member of Fondren Library's Acquisitions Department. In May of 1966 the Library experienced one of its worst floods. The basement was flooded during heavy rains while construction on the university air conditioning system progressed. Electricity was out for several days and numerous books, periodicals, and other library materials were damaged. Staff members formed a human chain to salvage flooded books and periodicals, and wonderfully supportive community members spent countless hours drying out materials. Such rescue operations for libraries are paramount to those

interested in special collections and archives. Nancy's involvement with helping devastated libraries has lasted throughout the years, including her providing valuable assistance to libraries hit hard by Houston's Tropical Storm Allison in 2001.

After several years in the Acquisitions Department, Nancy accepted the position as Head of Special Collections for the Woodson Research Center in 1972. The department, then only four years old, has been greatly influenced by Nancy's direction in the last 30 years. The center houses such varied items as rare

books, manuscript collections, and university archives. Rice and non-Rice researchers as well as students, staff, and community members utilize the rich volume of materials housed within the center.

The university archives includes anything related to the history of the university, including early drawings and plans for the univer-

sity. A notable acquisition in recent years is a Shakespeare "First Folio" from 1623 containing three plays, "The Tragedie of King Lear"; "The Tragedie of Othello, The Moore of Venice"; and "The Tragedie of Anthonie, and Cleopatra." Nancy has been instrumental in obtaining numerous important and notable collections and is particularly proud of two collections in Woodson: the Axson Collection and the Julian Huxley papers.

The Axson Collection, named for influential English professor Stockton Axson, began as the core of 2500 works purchased in 1956 from money donated in memory of Axson and with additional funds from Jesse

Jones. The collection consisted of approximately 50 percent of all the plays published in Great Britain during the eighteenth century. When Nancy began at

reer in the sciences and was granted a knighthood in 1958. The collection, which includes his personal library and important correspondence, was highly

sought after by several institutions. The papers took two years to obtain and required great effort from Nancy, who recalls a cold week in an unheated



Woodson she emphasized developing the collection, which has doubled in size during her tenure. Through aggressive seeking and collecting of additional materials the Axson collection now contains a near complete group of all the plays published between 1700 and 1800 in Great Britain, including numerous first editions and rare copies. The collection ranks as a premiere collection in the study of British drama.

Another collection highly prized by Nancy is the Julian Huxley papers. Julian Huxley was chosen by president Lovett to be Rice's first professor of biology, his tenure lasting from 1913 until 1916. He had a distinguished ca-

London office inspecting materials in the collection. Through the diligent efforts of Nancy and the assistance of donors, the Friends of Fondren, and many others, the Woodson Research Center was able to obtain the papers as well as a grant to cover the processing costs.

While Nancy's time at Rice has seen a great many success stories, she has also experienced many colorful episodes. She once spent several days at the University of Illinois campus police department helping to identify plates stolen from rare books by a Texas antiques dealer. Another time, she traveled to San Antonio to meet an elusive bar owner who claimed to have some Mexican

colonial printed books. And when some Kahlil Gibran exhibit materials in Woodson's care were misplaced she had to ward off the threat of calling in a clairvoyant to find the materials. A very recent episode occurred in Woodson's vault. The center's fire systems were undergoing inspection. This involved reviewing the halon system, a gas system that is often used in special collections and has more benefits than sprinklers or carbon dioxide systems. The technician was unaware of the halon tank that was located in the vault and accidentally set it off. The blast knocked several large boxes off of the tops of shelves and turned scores of paper documents into confetti.

Nancy is active in the Unitarian Church and has a wide range of cultural interests. She helped organize the Texas Salon, a local group that meets to discuss and promote the more interesting aspects of history. Her first job after graduating from Rice was as secretary to University Librarian William S. Dix. Later she



worked as an assistant for noted art collector Jean de Menil and, she is now enrolled in the Glassell School at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Fluent in French and Spanish, she is an avid traveler. For many years she, along with other members of the library staff, traveled with the Spanish Department on group trips. A recent trip found her on

the Sepik River in Papua, New Guinea where the three-story boat her group was traveling in ran aground. Trees crashed into glass on the upper tiers of the boat and they finally managed to get afloat, limping along on the return trip. Nancy has proven to be a great asset not only to the library, but also to Rice University, the greater Houston community, and beyond. Her multitude of talents is sure to leave a lasting impression here at Fondren Library.



Board Profiles

BY ELIZABETH W. KIDD



Frances Berryman Heyne

Frances is another on the board who grew up across the street from Rice – on University Boulevard, where her mother, Katherine Berryman, still lives. All of her cousins attended

Rice, so it's perhaps not surprising that, though she received her degree in Fine Arts from the University of Texas, she married a true Rice man. Dr. Edward Fred Heyne III attended Rice as did his father and his uncle, Roland Heyne, who was also the bursar at Rice for a number of years. Two of their four sons also attended Rice and we can hope that some among their nine grandchildren may also attend.

Her appreciation for art and antiques has guided both Frances' career and avocations. As an art consultant, she has helped create the interiors of many corporate headquarters in Houston, including Wells Fargo Bank, Coopers Lybrand, Price Waterhouse, and, most recently, Houston Pipeline (AEP). She and Ed, as evidenced in their home, have enjoyed collecting Pre-Columbian art, an endeavor initiated on their honeymoon in Mexico, and Southwest Indian pottery, an interest developed in her frequent trips to New Mexico that began when she was a child. Frances also collects antique dolls and ceramics. Their collecting has been part of the trips they enjoy – for many years to Mexico, now more to Western Europe, and, in the fall, to Istanbul and the Greek Isles.

Her appreciation for art and antiques

has also guided much of her volunteer work. She has served for over twenty years as a Bayou Bend docent, often in a leadership role. She has chaired the Winedale Symposium of the UT History Center and has been on the board of the Harris County Heritage Society.

As the chair of the Friends of Fondren Library 2001 Gala, Frances, as might be expected gave that special consideration to the aesthetics of the evening, and it was a beautiful night that also raised a record sum for the occasion. That she took on that job after only a year on the board is a testament to her energy and dedication (though with her dry humor she might say to her naïveté), and for that we are grateful.



Lee Chatham Seureau

Lee Seureau provides us with another example of a board member whose work for the Friends is borne of an early acquaintance with Rice.

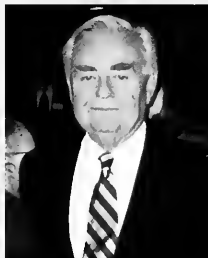
Lee's father, Lee Chatham, was in the Rice class of 1923. He was Student Band Director and later, Director of the Marching Band, and for years director of a popular dance band, "Lee's Owls." Lee remembers attending as a young girl the dedication of the grand piano in the student center in honor

of her father, and their many Sunday afternoon rides through the campus.

With Lee's innumerable contributions to the Friends, including chairing the 1999 gala and the 1998 book sale, and currently acting as vice-chair of the 2002 gala, one wonders that she is active in so many other educational and civic endeavors. She is co-founder of the Rice Historical Society, and serves on its board. She is active at St. Martin's Episcopal Church, Kinkaid School, and the Live Stock Show and Rodeo, among others.

Most fascinating to me is her work with the Sports Car Club of America, perhaps an offshoot of her interest in the family business, Star Motor Cars. She is the Points Keeper of the Southwest Division, was the first woman to race in the Club's Southwest Division, founded "the Grid," the safety check for driver and vehicle, and holds a National Starters License!!

When not (very) busy with all of the above, Lee enjoys time with her husband Glenn and their three grandchildren, Suzanna Lee, daughter of Caroline and husband Tom Jinks, and Peter and Harrison, sons of their son Glenn. She is also a great cook (making with Karen Rogers quite a team for many charitable organizations), and often graciously hosts the Friends of Fondren Gala Committee. One could say she is "the driver" of many worthwhile efforts, and we are glad the Friends of Fondren Library is one of them.



**Alan Harris Bath,
Ph.D.**

Alan and his wife Connie for many years before he began his service on the board frequently attended the Friends of

Fondren Library events. As a board member he has continued to be very active, especially as a regular contributor to *The Flyleaf*. He also chaired the Rice Authors Reception in 2001.

That he has been such an accomplished contributor to *The Flyleaf* is not surprising, given that Alan is a published author. His book, *Tracking the Axis Enemy*, was published in 1999 by the University Press of Kansas. It is a history of Naval intelligence in World War II, and began as a dissertation for his Ph.D. (Rice '95). As a retired Captain of the U.S. Navy who specialized in intelligence, Alan was well qualified to address the topic, but as it grew into a book he and Connie extended their travels for research purposes. They went to England, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Not bad duty, really.

On all of those trips they found time for extensive walks, another interest. Alan has been on the national board of AVA, the American Volkssport Association. Connie explained to me that the organization began in Germany and was brought to the United States after World War II. It has branches in most cities and encourages "short" walks of ten or twenty kilometers or so, at one's own pace.

Alan holds a Visiting Scholar Appointment at Rice. In addition to his work for the Friends, he is a member of the Rice Historical Society board, a volunteer at the Houston Arboretum, and is a member of the Houston World Affairs Council. He and Connie are taking a course on art appreciation at the Museum of Fine Arts and they very much enjoy the Houston Grand Opera. All in all, a very full life for a "retired" fellow.



**Edward B.
"Teddy" Adams**

Teddy Adams joined the Friends of Fondren Library board in 2000; it became immediately clear that he would be an excellent board member. He

circled all areas of possible volunteer responsibilities with the exception of the Homecoming Brunch. Then when asked the next year to chair the Homecoming Brunch, he agreed and did an excellent job!

Teddy is one of our younger board members, a 1991 graduate of Rice. Having called Texas home since his family moved to Austin in the mid-seventies, Teddy chose to return to Texas after graduating from Stanford Law School. He is currently a Senior Associate with Fulbright, Jaworski.

At Rice, Teddy was the president of Will Rice College, a job that no doubt prepared him in part for his specialty in litigation. He also played rugby (more preparation for

trial work), and helped Rice become State Champs in 1989, All-State Champs in 1990 and 1991, and Regional Champs in 1991. He continued to play rugby until last year when the demands of work became too great for him to carry on. He continues to work out (in case rugby should become again feasible?), and enjoys reading in his spare time.

Of spare time, he must have little. Last year, in addition to serving on the Friends of Fondren board, he co-chaired his Rice 10-year class reunion giving campaign. In the broader community, he is co-chairman of the Legal Lines Committee, a director of the Houston Young Lawyers Association; a director of the Houston Lawyer Referral Service; works with the Houston Young Lawyers Aspiring Youth Program; and is on the editorial board of The Houston Lawyer. He also serves on the board of the Affiliated Systems of Memorial Hermann Hospitals. It's a good thing he stays in such good shape!

Treasures in the Attic

PART IV

ADMIRAL SIR WILLIAM SIDNEY SMITH, ROYAL NAVY

BY ALAN HARRIS BATH

In many an attic, lying near-forgotten, are souvenirs of wars past – a helmet, sword, or faded uniform. Rice is no exception. However, its remembrances are on paper, not steel or cloth. One of these is the papers of Admiral Sir William Sidney Smith, Royal Navy.

The Admiral well could have served as a model for the character of Jack Aubrey, hero of Patrick O'Brian's popular series of sea stories. Smith was a swashbuckler, often at odds with his masters in London, and recognized as one of the earliest proponents of "Com-

mando" type warfare. His fame resides chiefly in his defense of the Eastern Mediterranean port of Acre against Napoleon in 1799. Using small boat raids Smith captured the supplies stockpiled by Bonaparte for his planned attack then, during the siege, landed a force of sailors armed with pikes who helped win the land battle. Like Aubrey, earlier in the war Smith had been a French prisoner of war in Paris and later became a Member of Parliament while still a serving officer.

The Smith papers in the Woodson Research Center include letters from Sir William's brother, John Spencer Smith, at the time British Ambassador to the Porte at Constantinople and letters to him from Robert Liston, who in 1796 became

British Minister to the United States. In addition to letters from Sir William, the collection contains his battle order for the HMS *Tigre* at the siege of Acre, a series of watercolors and drawings attributed to John Spencer Smith, and a fascinating

collection of Smith family and British navy memorabilia. The collection was acquired over an eight year period from dealers in Paris and London, and its purchase financed, in part, by funds from the Friends of Fondren.

How did this trove of the Napoleonic

era find a home at Rice? Dr. Hardin Craig, Jr., provided the impetus. At the time the collection was acquired Dr. Craig was Librarian of the Fondren Library. Dr. Craig received his doctorate at Harvard, taught at Hobart College in Geneva, New York, and later at California Institute of Technology, in the field of naval history. He came to Rice as an Assistant Professor of History in 1946, and became Librarian in 1953. During his fifteen years as its librarian, Rice acquired other notable collections: the Confederate imprints, the James Lockhart Autrey papers, and the Nadler collection of German literature, to name a few. Following his service as librarian, in 1968 Dr. Craig returned to teaching at Rice, spending

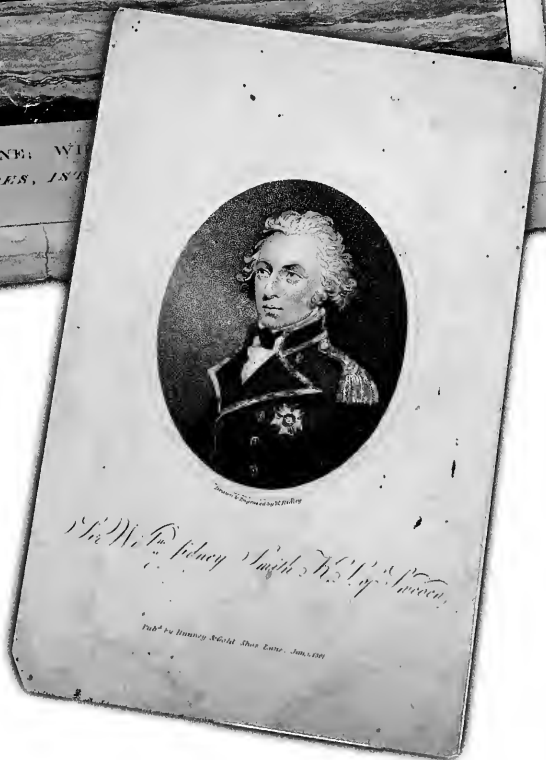




U.S. CORVETTE LARNET ANCHORED OFF CHAGRES, INT.

summers instructing in American Maritime History at the Munson Institute in Mystic Seaport, Connecticut.

Throughout Dr. Craig's career, naval history of the Napoleonic Wars remained an object of study and research. It is thanks to his continuing interest that we, at Rice, now have a share of the papers of Admiral Sir William Sidney Smith, RN, as our military treasure in the attic.



Wm. Sidney Smith R.N.

Printed by Dr. Henry Smith, New York, June, 1891

Bookmark

Bookmark is the book club of the Friends of Fondren Library, featuring book reviews both in print and online at our web site. You can participate by adding your own reviews and comments. Log on to www.rice.edu/Fondren which is the library's home page. Click on Friends of Fondren, and at the Friends' home page, click on Bookmark.

Niagara Falls All Over Again

by Elizabeth McCracken

(Dell Publishing Company, 2001)

Review by Katherine Feibleman Miner

It is hard to imagine anyone who has more fun writing than Elizabeth McCracken. I say that knowing full well, and first hand, that the act of writing is rarely a rollicking good time. It's demanding, all-consuming, often heart-wrenching work. But McCracken's writing comes across as being the result of someone having a darned good time, and someone having that much fun is contagious. I can see her sitting at her computer, giggling at the latest challenge she's set for herself: How does a comedian face tragedy? What would a bunch of drunken vaudevillians in a clandestine bar at four in the morning say to each other? How would a

song for a television show about a puppet-pig sound? *Niagara Falls All Over Again* is the product of a talented writer testing her own talent and reveling in the possibilities.

This is the story of a comedy team in the tradition of Abbott and Costello. They are rising in vaudeville as vaudeville is dying, and they go on to have great success making bad but popular movies. The narrator, Mose Sharp, is the son of a Jewish immigrant living in Des Moines, Iowa. When Sharp is four, his mother dies after the last of

many difficult deliveries (seven children lived, six died). We see him follow his vaudeville dream even though his co-dreamer, his sister Hattie, dies. Sharp is a man defined primarily by his relationships to others. It is his sister Hattie who first defines him as a performer. Then his pairing with Rocky Carter defines him as a straight man. Early in their friendship when Carter calls Sharp a lady's man, the previously inexperienced Sharp proceeds to pick up a woman in a bar because that is the role Carter has laid out for



him. Later, Sharp pairs with a wife, a dancer who knows her mind and chooses to put her family first, as Sharp inevitably comes to do. It is his relationship _ or sometimes lack of one _ with his comedy partner that takes center stage in the novel. Carter is the loud, funny man who makes most of their decisions. He is very likable, despite his pushy, self-centeredness, and Sharp is likable too, as a straight man who is anything but boring.

The most notable aspect of Elizabeth McCracken's work is her voice. In her first book, the short-story collection *Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry*, and in her first novel, the well-received *The Giant's House*, McCracken's voice is unmistakable _ hilariously funny, sharp, and insightful. *The Giant's House* brought her much critical attention and well-deserved praise, but it is here, in the world of comedy, that McCracken's voice seems to find its most fitting home. The narrator is funny, the characters are funny, the world they live in is funny. Sharp's life has much tragedy in it, and McCracken deftly moves the reader back and forth between these emotional poles. We laugh *with* the characters, never *at* them, because no matter how oddball they are, the writer clearly loves each of them and brings us to do the same. At a makeshift bar in the cellar of a home in the middle of nowhere, we meet a big-drinking,

big-talking Scottish acrobat who has only one arm and one leg, described as "just a different model of man, a coupe instead of a sedan." Then there is the ventriloquist who, it is widely recognized, is not half the man Sammy, his dummy, is. Sammy is well dressed, someone who can hold his drinks and definitely likes the ladies (two important qualities in this group): "Sammy was a star. It was a shame he had to work with such a dullard. Imagine what he could have been with the right partner!"

The book is filled with such unusual examples of mankind, but they never seem unbelievable. McCracken always finds a way to thread them and the reader together by giving these characters down-to-earth common concerns _ money problems, loneliness, lost love. In this novel, the reader is given the opportunity to glimpse a world, the now-dead world of vaudeville, and what he sees there is a mixture of everyman's concerns and outrageous lifestyles. The reader accompanies Sharp as he lives out many a person's dream of fame and money and as he navigates the life of a straight man by partnering with strong-willed people and ultimately having to choose his own path.

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April 26, 2002

This year's gala honoring the Honorable Edward W. "Mike" Kelley, Jr. and Mrs. Kelley will be held on Friday, April 26, 2002 at 7:00 p.m. at the River Oaks Country Club.

May 21, 2002

The Friends of Fondren Annual Meeting will be Tuesday, May 21, 2002, at Cohen House, featuring David Vaisey, Bodley's Librarian Emeritus at Oxford University, who will deliver an interesting lecture titled "Four Centuries of Collecting: The Bodleian Library 1602-2002." The evening will begin with a reception, followed by dinner and program.



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